Eckhart Tolle - The I that is Eternally Present 1

[Speaker 1] (0:00 - 10:43)

It doesn't happen very often that I talk at a university. It's happened a few times, though. And every time, it feels a little strange, because universities are places whose purpose is the cultivation of thought, to train the mind, to add things to the mind, to improve your ability to think, to analyze, to absorb information, to regurgitate information, to dissect information.

So universities are to do with the cultivation of mind. And when I'm at a university, I ask myself, do they realize who they let in here? Subversive activity.

Because the very essence of what we talk about, and the essence of the teaching, if it can be called that, for lack of a better word, is that it's possible to go beyond mind, beyond thought. It's not to deny the validity and the importance of thought. Without thought, no words would be coming out of my mouth.

And thought is very helpful. But the essence of the teaching is, and it's not just this teaching, if you look deeply, you will see it's also the essence of all, ultimately, all spiritual teachings. Although it's never said so openly, the possibility for humans to go to a level of consciousness that includes thought, but is not reduced to thought.

But the realization that the realm of consciousness is much vaster than we thought through thought. So that consciousness is not, as most people would think, is not synonymous with the production of noise in the head, which is thought. That consciousness is much vaster than the human mind.

It does not exclude the human mind. The human mind is, of course, an essential part. It is one of many possible ways in which consciousness can express itself.

But the human dilemma is, and has been for a long, long time, that they identify almost exclusively with mind activity. First of all, if you look at the nature of the human mind in a very basic way, the first thing that strikes you is that it's extremely active. It goes on and on.

It hardly ever stops. It's a continuous stream of thought that goes through one's head. It's a noise that you can't really switch off.

And even psychologists who are not perhaps interested in, those psychologists who are not interested in going beyond thought or cannot see anything further than thought, they examined the nature of thought and came up with the conclusion, yes, that 98% of it is repetitive, completely repetitive. And a large percentage of that is also unnecessary. It does not address anything specific that needs to be done now.

Thought is not being applied specifically to a particular purpose. It just is there. And whether you want it or whether you need it or not, you are condemned to living with a noise machine in the head.

And it's so normal that hardly anybody ever questions that, that you can't stop thinking. And some thoughts are fine, there may be a few nice thoughts, and then many thoughts are problematic. You can look at your own mind to see how often thought is concerned with problems.

And very often, or in most cases, it is not a problem that is here now, that is actual, true actuality, true reality here now. It is a problem that is generated in and through mental noise. This, for example, is the case when you worry.

You are in bed, very warm, protected. It's all quiet and you're breathing, but you're worried. Mental noise is in a state of hyperactivity.

All this is very normal. And if that were all, that would be bad enough to be continuously trapped, not being able to get out, not being able to get out of that mental noise. Except very rarely, almost by accident.

But then there's more to it than that. Because after a while, because mental noise these days starts at a very early age. After a while, your whole sense of who you are, your sense of self, of identity, your essential sense of me, is bound up with thought activity.

You tell yourself who you are. A mental image comes into being, that is, who I think I am, a me. And you will find that a lot of the thought activity that goes on is to do with me.

It's the me. The me in the head. The image that who I think I am.

Me and my problems. A lot of thought focuses on me and my problems and how I'm going to get out of them. How I'm going to solve them.

Thought does not realise that its activity itself, to a large extent, creates the problems. It says, no, I'm thinking so hard and I'm boring about this because I need to be responsible for my life if I don't worry anymore, if I don't continuously think about me and my problems and what's going to happen to me, my life will collapse. So, seeking one's identity in and through thought is normal.

So, when one speaks the word I, which is perhaps the most frequently used word in the language, when you speak the word I, it usually refers to me, the mind-based sense of self. The me that I think I am. Me and my story, which I dwell on almost continuously.

So, to get your... And this is what in ancient spiritual traditions has been called the self. In Buddhism, in some traditions, it's called the false self.

The sense of self. And even in Christianity, Jesus said, straight statement, deny yourself.

And perhaps the meaning goes deeper than what we usually believe, how we usually interpret that sentence.

Perhaps it's even not a good translation of what he really said.

[Speaker 2] (10:46 - 11:02)

So, self is to do with really who you are, what the essence of your identity is. Is the essence of your identity thought, mind activity?

[Speaker 1] (11:03 - 11:45)

Is the essence of your identity of who you are the content of your mind? And the corresponding emotions that accompany or reflect in the body the content of your mind. Is that the essence of who you are?

And that's of course the famous statement by the philosopher Descartes, who wanted to examine, to find out what the most fundamental truth of human existence is. And he said, I think, therefore I am. That is the one statement that expresses the fundamental truth.

[Speaker 2] (11:45 - 11:50)

So he equated thought with being.

[Speaker 1] (11:54 - 12:06)

And that was, even at his time, already normal to equate who you are with mind activity.

[Speaker 2] (12:12 - 12:28)

And this evening, we are here to perhaps explore whether there is something deeper to who you are than thought.

[Speaker 1] (12:31 - 13:30)

We are not just here to address it intellectually, in other words, through thought, or formulate some new belief, which is also thought, that, oh, there is more to me than thought. I believe that. And I can have an argument with you if you don't believe that.

And if I can have an argument with you, the sense of self that I derive from thought, from my mind, will become strengthened, because I'm fighting with someone. I'm engaged in the process of being right, which means I identify my sense of self, of who I am, with a mental position. I say, this mental position, this opinion, this belief, this theory, and who I am, are one.

[Speaker 2] (13:30 - 13:43)

This is identity. Identify with means to make the same as. And when you identify with, you make it the same as yourself.

That's what identification means.

[Speaker 1] (13:44 - 14:23)

So you identify with a mental position, my opinion, my belief. So your sense of who you are is derived from that. And anybody who questions this belief, or this mental position, will be questioning and attacking your very sense of self.

That's why people get so worked up when you start doubting them or questioning that they are right. To be wrong is extremely threatening to a mind-based sense of self.

[Speaker 2] (14:24 - 14:52)

It's the worst thing. So it needs to defend itself. It's not defending the thought, the belief, or the position.

It's defending the illusion of that self, of being as if it were fighting for my life. And so the mind-based sense of self needs to be right.

[Speaker 1] (14:53 - 15:23)

It needs also, it loves also somebody else to be wrong. Because then my sense of self becomes strengthened. I can prove that you are wrong.

I have removed identity from who you are in the mad belief of this egoic self. I have removed identity essence from you and I've added it to me. I'm bigger now than you.

[Speaker 2] (15:26 - 15:30)

So we are not here to create a new belief.

[Speaker 1] (15:31 - 17:07)

But we are not here to add to thought. It may look at first as if they were. We are not here to add to the content of the mind, the accumulated content of the mind, which is already huge in everyone.

It's not a passing insult. The very fact that you live at this time in this world means that you have already a lot of accumulated content. I read recently that every day the New York Times contains more information and more data than the average person living in the 17th century would come across in a lifetime.

Let alone the weekend edition of the New York Times. Now, but there is also, because for most people their sense of self and mind are one, there is also a great need, a

compulsion almost, to add more to the mind. There is a kind of greed one could say.

The mind wants more.

[Speaker 2] (17:09 - 17:23)

More information, more knowledge, more of this, add something to itself, because it strengthens the always unsatisfying sense of self that is derived from the mind.

[Speaker 1] (17:24 - 17:34)

What I'm saying now, one or two of you, if you are completely in the mind, they even sound frightening or you may get angry.

[Speaker 2] (17:35 - 17:36)

That's all right.

[Speaker 1] (17:37 - 17:51)

To observe that the mind looks for more and there is nothing wrong with learning new things, but it is looking for more in order to strengthen its sense of self.

[Speaker 2] (17:52 - 18:05)

And here, the essence of this gathering is not, normally it would be, anywhere else in this building I'm sure, people get together to add.

[Speaker 1] (18:06 - 43:27)

And here we are getting together not to add to the content of the mind, but to become aware of the content of your mind and of mental noise and see it as for what it is, which is mental noise. Thought. Helpful, very useful for many practical purposes.

Essential to survive in this world. Of course, your knowledge also, you couldn't do without it. What we are addressing here is your sense of self.

The moment your sense of self becomes equated with mind and thought, that is where the mind becomes very problematic and where your life becomes very problematic and where there is a heaviness to it or to the self, the mind-based sense of self or the self as they call it in Buddhism. And as Buddhism, I'm not a Buddhist, I'm not anything and you don't need to be anything, but if you are, it doesn't matter. We are not here to change your beliefs in any way.

To become aware of beliefs as beliefs. They are fine. We are not here to create a new belief, but we are here to enable a level of consciousness to arise and in most of you it's arising already, otherwise you wouldn't even have come here unless somebody dragged

you here against your will.

We are here to become aware within ourselves of a dimension that is deeper than mental noise, that's all, where you are still very awake and very conscious, but there is a realm of vibrantly alive stillness within yourself in which thought activity subsides and we'll be going into that. So it's equating who you are with a mental image, that is the illusion of the self. You may have heard of the Buddhist master who when asked to define the essence of Buddhism said, that's very simple, the essence of Buddhism is no self, no problem.

He was talking of a mind-based sense of self. And that is to do with me and my story, the story of my life. And it begins in childhood.

It begins for a child at the age one and a half or two, whenever they start to speak, the first thing, one of the first things they learn is to speak their name. And the question that the parents ask the child is, who are you? Equate the name with who they are.

And then the child repeats his or her name. That sounds pretty harmless, and of course it's inevitable, I'm not saying don't tell the child the name, but you can see there's a transition there from a stage of the one year old, in whom the mind has not started up yet, but who is already conscious of you, and conscious of surroundings, and conscious of sense perceptions, but thought processes, conceptual thought, has not yet started. It has not yet accumulated words in the mind, noise.

So the mental accumulations haven't started, and you can look into the eyes of a one year old, and see something that is of such purity, and there's such aliveness and light, there is consciousness looking through those eyes at you. It is amazing when you look into the eyes of a child in whom the mind hasn't started up yet, and that child looks back at you, and there's complete openness, and aliveness, and trust, and joy, and the child is probably smiling at you, and you know you're not being judged by the child, because it hasn't yet got the instrument that would enable it to judge. There is simply aliveness, consciousness, light coming out of the eyes, so to speak.

And then the mind begins, your name, you learn what your name is, and that's the beginning of a mind-based sense of self. It looks fairly harmless, but from then onwards, you are such and such, that you tell yourself, that's me. Now the name is not enough, the name now needs to accumulate.

If you look at your name as a receptacle, or a basket, that provides the receptacle for further content with which you identify as yourself, experiences, opinions, your parents' opinions of who you are. That becomes very important content, and you ask, your parents tell you you are stupid, then you have already mental content accumulated in this basket that is your name, and it will be very hard to get rid of that. And other experiences, knowledge, sufferings, people that you know, cultural backgrounds, many

things, they form the content of your mind, and around it, there is the name that holds it all together.

And that is the content, and that is added to, and the strange thing is, after a few years of accumulating content, then you think you know who you are, but it's never quite enough yet. And not only for a young person, as you grow older, you will find your sense of self is never, very rarely, and only for brief moments, really feels complete, that you are fully yourself. There's always, no, I am not enough yet, is the essential belief of a mind-based sense of self.

And on the level of doing, of course it's true, because there's always so much more that you could do. You would never be, there are innumerable things that you could do, but there just isn't enough time, and even if you lived for a thousand years, you couldn't explore all the possible things that you could do. So eventually you choose one course of action or one activity, and then suddenly you exclude so many others.

Or you're trying to get to some projected goal, the pinnacle of my profession, or whatever it is, and I need to get there to be myself, I need the recognition, I need, and for years you've worked towards that, and maybe you get there, and maybe you don't. Many don't, because not everybody can triumph. To make it, you can only make it, in other words, enhance your sense of self in the eyes of the world through making it, if many others don't make it.

Otherwise it doesn't make sense, making it becomes meaningless. So for anybody who makes it in the eyes of the world, in whatever field, you need at least a thousand others who don't make it, otherwise it will no longer serve your sense of identity, you don't feel special anymore. If everybody makes it, well, then I have to think of something else.

Maybe then I'll try not to make it, and then I can be a failure, and poor, and very special in that. And that's not as funny as it sounds, because quite a few people develop that as part of their sense of self. The sense of self needs to feel special in some way, if you can't make it and derive, and then of course you're telling that yourself in the mind, that you have made it, and others will confirm it to you, perhaps that you've made it.

But if you can't make it, then you can gain a specialness through failing. Poor me, who failed, who didn't make it because the world treated me unfairly, and life circumstances were hostile, and I had a bad start in life, or whatever, and an image forms of somebody who has been wronged, perhaps that's one of many possibilities, that you've been wronged by the world, or by a particular person, or your parents, and that can be a very strong sense of self too, a sense of having failed. I have failed in the eyes of the world.

I had a few chances, but somehow it didn't work out, and I didn't make it. These are perhaps two extremes, one person who thinks he or she made it, for most they fluctuate between one day, for a few days you think you're fine, and then suddenly some critical

remark by somebody destroys your sense of self. So it's forming some image of who you are.

So it doesn't really matter to that sense of self whether you make it or not. If you have a very unhappy sense of self, a miserable sense of self, that works too. It gives you an identity.

You can talk to others about why you are miserable, and what the world has done to you, or whatever it is, and you can strengthen it, and others will confirm, they will listen and say, yes, you're right. Great, it works. And everybody knows the great reluctance in people, once a particular sense of self has established itself in the mind, a great reluctance to let go of that, and every therapist knows how strong the compulsion is to sabotage awareness.

How strong the compulsion is to hang on to the sense of self. I had a, I worked, when I saw people individually, a woman would come and see me, and her main story was how unhappy her marriage was, and she was continuously thinking about how difficult her husband was to live with, and how irritating he was, and continuously reacting, whatever he did was irritating to her, and that became, her sense of self was based on that reactive irritation, and all the mind activity around it, and after a little while, after a few months, I pointed out to her that she can either leave him, or she can observe that particular mindset, that mind pattern with which she was identified, the reactive pattern, and you can actually allow him to be, instead of reacting. She saw the possibility of freedom, there was a moment when she saw it, of stepping out of that mind-based sense of self, and then she said suddenly, but if I let go of that, what have I got left? If I let go of that, what have I got left?

Who am I then? A pattern that I've been identified with in the mind for 10, 20, or 30 years, if I let go of that, who am I? My sad story, if I let go of my sad story, and this applies to quite a few people, who am I without that?

That is now to see that no matter how successful you've been in the eyes of the world, the sense of self that is mind-derived, thought-derived, is never at ease and fulfilled for long. It's in its nature to feel a sense of lack and unfulfillment. That is the mind-based sense of self.

And everybody's story somehow didn't quite go the way it should have gone. Me and my story, it should have gone differently. I imagined it was going to be different.

It didn't quite work out, at least not yet. But I have future. I have enough future for it to work out.

In other words, my sense of self, of who I am, can become complete. I can be in a state of ease and fully myself. The belief is all I need is more future to add certain things to

who I am.

And this is, now, this is very essential to add the belief that through adding certain things with which you identify content of the mind, image, whatever it may be, you identify with a car, this is an image, you identify with knowledge, I have accumulated knowledge, you become bigger, anything, the compulsion to add things, to have more, and through that, believing that your sense of self at some point will complete itself, then I will have arrived. The story will have found its happy ending. So it's seeking self, self-seeking through adding further content through future.

I'm not saying that your life, that you shouldn't add more knowledge or more expertise to your life. That's all wonderful. And for all that, of course, you need future to learn new things, to acquire new knowledge.

For all that, you need future. But seeking an enhanced or strengthened or more complete sense of self through that is futile. It's frustrating.

You never arrive at that sense of self even if you add in endless content. It's never enough. It may feel enough for a little while.

And then again, oh, and what, that wasn't quite it. That's being, and you try the material realm and add, identify with things that you call a mental image of successful in material terms. And after a while, that feels good for a little while.

And you have the car, the big house, and then you sit in your big car and it feels good. And then after a while, it's just you're sitting in this thing. It has four wheels and it takes you from A to B.

Yes, it is more comfortable than others. And then you need others to notice you. That's a relative rudimentary way of strengthening your sense of self.

And then it becomes more subtle adding then perhaps to knowledge through finding the person that's going to make you happy. Adding, I need to add, so then it becomes, you desperately need the future. And you desperately need whatever activity you're engaged in, you need desperately the result.

You become dependent on the outcome is all important, whether you make it or not. So you can't really enjoy the doing so much because you're so obsessed with getting there. So it's a compulsion to add in order to complete yourself.

Without that compulsion, learning new things, engaging in certain activities is very enjoyable. Wonderful joy of doing and learning. But if you're looking for yourself, that's always, that spoils the potential for great joy and aliveness while you do.

Because the result becomes all important, the outcome, I must get there. I need to

become, so to see the fallacy of self-seeking in the future. So if it's not there, if you cannot find the essence of your being which is far beyond mental noise as the mind could tell you, if you cannot find it through adding more things to who you think you are, if you cannot find it through more future, where is it?

How can one go beyond the mind-made sense of self? How to step out of that? And the mind will be very interested in this.

The mind will say, well, I'd like to get out of that. Let me know what I have to do and how to get there. Let me know the steps I need to take.

In other words, the deep-seated mindset that needs future will operate again. Even if you now go into spiritual, because everybody is seeking for him or herself. That's why they are all rushing about needing to get to the future.

Why is everybody rushing about where are they all going to? Stop anybody and of course if you ask them, where are you going to? Where are you rushing to?

And they're all rushing even if they're not running, even at home, that stress, where are you going to? But ultimately, if you take away the particular, you will arrive at the general, which is they're all trying to get to the future as quickly as possible. I need to get to that future point.

And this is on a minor scale. It could be just the next moment when I have completed this task that I'm doing. Or it could be on a larger scale.

I need to get to that point in three years' time when I will have finally finished what I'm working at now. Finally. So everybody is on my way to the future, of course, that's where I'm going.

And then you say, yeah, but what about here? What about this moment? Well, this moment doesn't really fit into my story.

It shouldn't be the way it is. That's why I'm trying to get away from it. I don't want that.

I want the mentally projected next moment because the next moment is going to fit into my story. And that's why I'm in such a hurry to get away from this moment. This moment, of course, it's important because it's the stepping stone that enables me to get to the next one, which is so much more important.

So when you look, there's an enormous compulsion towards future and needing to not look at this moment, not, no. And when you observe people and you can see in their expression and the way they move and the way they speak, it's a denial of this moment in my story. And children learn that early on at school, how important, you need to get there.

So remember, we are not denying that you need future to get from A to B. We're not denying that you need future to learn a language or to learn how to cook or to learn how to use the computer or to look at your watch and it works well. You can meet somebody at five o'clock.

It's helpful, otherwise life would become difficult. We'll meet at some point. There's no problem with that level of time and future, but not talking about that.

We are talking about self-seeking in future. Trying to become happy in the future, but you're not. And that is an amazing thing if you see that most people live in that their whole life and then unless something happens and they get a dreadful shock and there's a moment of awakening.

You awaken out of a conditioned mindset and if spiritual awakening, which is a term that's been used for a long time in spirituality and ancient eastern traditions, awakening, if it has any meaning, awakening is not to be equated with suddenly having new ideas about spirituality or God in your head or suddenly reinterpret the universe and true awakening is far deeper than that. It's not exchanging one set of ideas for another set of ideas. Awakening is to awaken out of